

# Some Reflections On The Theoretical Discourse On Communications In Quebec and Canada

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I have been, and remain, very put off by the title of this session. In the first place, it is difficult to translate with exactitude into French. It seems to me that, if it had been conceived in French, it would have been formulated more in terms of epistemology or the theory of knowledge. My problem, however, is not simply one of translation: the subject in itself is a difficult one. And one must have been naive or ambitious to have agreed to tackle it. I could have approached it modestly, by dealing with the contribution of one author or one specific theory to the study of communications. But no. In order to make life more complicated, I tried to look at the topic in its entirety. To do so would have required that I undertake to read everything on communications published in Canada and Quebec. Obviously, I have not done so. My familiarity with the work of English Canadians is very narrow: it is limited to Innis, McLuhan and the work of a few colleagues in Ontario, British Columbia and Montreal. The work of Innis and of McLuhan is certainly highly original. Innis is, unfortunately, little known among Francophones, while McLuhan enjoys an international reputation. I will leave it to my colleagues to evaluate their contribution and importance.

My contribution will, ultimately, be a very modest one. I will be satisfied, within an epistemological perspective which seeks to bring to light the conditions underlying the production of knowledge in communications, with advancing a few propositions and making several comments on the situation of theoretical work in communications. My reading will be partial, and no doubt biased by my own intellectual training, which owes much to sociology, social psychology and, to a lesser degree, anthropology and history. My remarks will organize themselves around the following propositions:

- 1) Scientific discourse — including that of communications — is not exempt from ideological postulates. It is conditioned by political,

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economic, social and cultural factors. However, the internationalization of the capitalist economy has tended to a certain degree to impose, almost everywhere in the West, the same constraints and the same sorts of questions and priorities upon scientific work. Within the field of communications, the major phenomenon to be considered is the increasing industrialization of culture.

2) The project of science itself, insofar as its aims and methodologies are concerned, tends towards an abstraction from particular conditions and contributes to the growing uniformity of views of man and society.

3) Properly speaking, there does not exist, at the present time, a Quebecois theory of communications. Communications studies there are new, researchers are relatively young, and the research work is highly diversified. The situation in communications research in Quebec is not a homogeneous one. One can find there all the major currents of thought active in the communications field in the West, from behaviorism to pragmatism, and including structuralism.

This is not to say that the work of Quebec scholars is devoid of any originality. The historical context in Quebec has made them sensitive to certain questions, and led them to privilege certain concepts and theoretical approaches.

In general, however, communication theory is under-developed in Quebec. The effort invested in theoretical work is insufficient. The Quebecois are rich in ideas for conceiving new experiments. Unfortunately, they too often borrow their theoretical models from elsewhere and let others make the effort to analyse and theoretically interpret their experiments. For example: the Quebecois have undertaken numerous experiments with community media, the French, only a few. Nevertheless, it is the French who have written the most on community media...in Québec!

4) The concepts of cultural identity and cultural domination seem to me to be central to the problematic of communications in Quebec. They call for the development of a critical communications theory.

### **General theory vs National theory**

It is to be understood by the theme proposed for this panel — The Intellectual Foundations of Canadian Communications Theory — that there exist national scientific theories, marked by specific characteristics? Is science not universal and disdainful of political boundaries?

Numerous epistemological and historical works have demonstrated that any specific theory grows out of a given context and rests upon certain ideological and political postulates. A neutral science, free of any compromise, does not exist. Its proponents and

its beneficiaries are always political, whether the researchers are aware of this or not.

As expressed so well by Dallas Smythe, "I mean by this that science and technique necessarily imply choices concerning the problems to be studied and the knowledges to be applied, and that such choices are engendered and conditioned by the social structure of power relations existing at a given moment, and, in turn, affect this situation"<sup>1</sup>

To discuss the foundations of theoretical work in communications, then, is first of all to inquire into the influence of the socio-cultural context in which it is inscribed. However, it would be an illusion to believe that the determinants of theoretical work respect the boundaries of national states. Besides, these national states are themselves in crisis. Their independence, their room for manoeuvre are threatened and reduced by a capitalism which is undergoing multi-nationalization. Like the economy and culture, science — including communications sciences — faces internationalization.

This tendency towards internationalization, uniformity, and abstraction from specific conditions is inscribed within the very project of an objectivizing science and of the mathematization of the real. Drawing on Husserl's interrogations, William Leiss has acutely posed the paradox of contemporary science: "This is the resulting paradox: the methodical abstractness of modern science, its discovery that all matter possesses a uniform hidden structure and that the principles of its behavior are universally valid and can be expressed in mathematical formulas, is precisely the source of its astonishing productivity in its on going interaction with technology. Necessarily, however, this very abstractness means that the scientific understanding of nature and the scientific methodology — this model of a silent, colorless universe of matter in motion — in the final analysis remains mute in the theater of human behavior."<sup>2</sup>

Even more than through its aims, science is linked to capitalist society by the types of organization within which scientists work. We are no longer in the era of the solitary humanist researcher. Modern researchers are grouped within vast organizations whose financing is dependent upon an alignment of the questions asked, the directions taken by research and development, and the economical-political objectives of the ruling class. Science has been closely linked to the development of private or state capitalism since its beginnings. In addition, as Schiller has clearly pointed out, "the necessary connection of the domination of a quantitative and predominantly mechanical view of nature and the soul (which takes all qualities from bodies) with the increasing domination of industry and technology...and the simultaneous connection between the same quantifying view of the world and the money-and-acquisition-

economy in which goods, stripped of all qualities, become a 'commodity'".<sup>3</sup>

The primary intellectual foundation of communications theory in Quebec and Canada is its participation in that scientific ideology which makes quantification and mathematization the measure of all worthwhile knowledge. The primary characteristic of our theoretical work exists, not on the level of our differences, but of our resemblances to other work. It would be astonishing if this were otherwise, given that we live in a country whose economy and culture are under foreign domination.

### **Cultural domination: the final stage of imperialism**

In 1978, the Quebec government issued a white paper entitled "La politique québécoise du développement culturel" (The Quebec Policy on Cultural Development). Culture is defined therein as "the life-environment, the meaning that citizens give to their lives, ways of conceiving their existence, of interpreting it, and of envisioning for it a future".<sup>4</sup> The white paper recognizes that culture "today supposes costly accoutrements", but does not make clear enough that, in Western capitalist economies, it has become industrially-produced merchandise, put on the market according to the laws of commercial marketing and massively consumed as goods and services. Culture can be spoken of less and less as the abstract opposed to the concrete, as the work of the soul opposed to the material world, as the universe of meaning opposed to the universe of the technical, the useful and the efficient. Culture is less and less free of merchandizing. The site of the creation of meaning, of explanations of the world and of ideological rationalization, cultural production more and more obeys the laws of the market, with its imperatives of rationalization and profitability.

The culture industries have become an important sector in the western economy. The French economist, Jacques Attali<sup>5</sup>, finding in education, culture and health new spaces for capitalist investment, speaks of self-surveillance industries, following upon and adding to the travel and home-life industries. Others speak intentionally of the consciousness industries.

The increased industrialization of culture has made it a crucial site of economic and political struggles, a new ground for the exercising of hegemonic relations. For sociologists Susan Crean and Marcel Rioux<sup>6</sup>, cultural domination constitutes the final stage of imperialism.

The conception of cultural industries in terms of ideological state apparatuses is an outmoded one. The culture industries are not simply apparatuses for the reproduction of the dominant ideology.

They are sites wherein contradictions develop, sites where domination is not a given, but at stake. The media are more than an instrument of power; they are one terrain among others wherein power constitutes itself.<sup>7</sup>

It is a secret to no-one that the Quebecois and Canadian culture industries are dominated by Americans. Quebecois and Canadians consume more American films, records and television programs than they do similar domestic productions. Film distribution throughout the country is controlled by Famous Players Universal, Columbia, Fox, Warners, etc....According to the most recent statistics published by the CRTC (12), the average Canadian spends 23 hours every week in front of his television screen. Of this total, the Anglophone consumes 70% in foreign programming, the Francophone, 46%. By all appearances, the pay television which the CRTC is preparing to authorize will increase the cultural dependence of Quebec and Canada<sup>8</sup>, by offering a wider range of foreign productions. The imaginary of Canadians and Quebecois will suffer even more from repeated assaults on the part of the American entertainment industry.

Technical and scholarly culture is not free from this American strangle-hold. According to the Canada Science Council<sup>9</sup>, Canadian businesses draw increasingly upon American data banks, and the situation in Canada, which was relatively good a few years ago, is steadily deteriorating. Another sign of dependence is the fact that Quebec scientists publish the majority of reports on their work in English. I would be curious to know the proportion of Anglophone Canadians who prefer to publish their work in the United States rather than in Canada.

It is in this overall context of cultural dependence that theoretical work on communications takes place in Quebec. It would be surprising if it itself did not borrow from foreign models. And, in fact, Quebec researchers make great use of American, French and German theorists. However, it would be simplistic to reduce the effect of Quebec's socio-historical context on the theoretical work of communications researchers to mimetism. The specific situation in Quebec renders them more sensitive to certain dimensions of communications, conditions the formulation of questions and colours the approaches privileged by communications theorists.

### **Communications theory and the Québécois context**

We have already stated that all the major currents of communications theory are represented in Quebec. Quebec — and this has already become a cliché — is situated at the crossroads of the great English and French intellectual traditions. All the new ideas

originating in one or the other thus find themselves being combined or opposed there. However, neither American behaviorism nor European Marxism have succeeded in imposing themselves as dominant theoretical models, even if they have greatly inspired many Quebecois scholars. Nor has semiology succeeded in making its mark as strongly as in France. In Quebec, communications theory has drawn its inspiration more from sociology, anthropology, political science and education studies than from psychology, linguistics or social philosophy.

Reasons for this can be found in specific aspects of the socio-historical situation in Quebec. Among others, we would suggest that the influence of the following factors should be noted:

- the importance of the reform of the educational system in the 1960's;
- the Federal-Provincial jurisdictional conflicts over communications;
- the minority-culture situation of Francophones in America;
- and American cultural domination.

It is not necessary to dwell at length on the large geographical expanse of Quebec and its low population density to become convinced of the place occupied there by communications technology. We would prefer, instead, to emphasize the role played by the reform of the educational system in the 1960's. Experiments such as TEVEC, Multi-Media experiments, the invasion of schools by audio-visual equipment and the creation of the Université de Québec and S.G.M.E. (Service général des moyens d'enseignement) networks by the Ministry of Education have stimulated reflection by numerous pedagogues and scholars in the human sciences on what is called educational technology. Education has been one of the main sectors for experimentation with communication techniques and for theoretical developments in communication. Two concepts, among others, emerge from this reflection: the conception of the person being trained as "*self-educating*", and the elaboration of educational strategies in terms of *multi-media networks*. The ideology of participation played a major role in the evolution of Quebec throughout the 1960's and 1970's. The notion of "self-education" is part of that ideology. In communications, this is translated into a radical critique of the passive role of the spectator and the call for an active role in the communication process.

All of these educational experiments were motivated by an objective of generalized access to education, especially on the part of adults and the under-privileged classes. In Innis' terms, one could interpret these efforts as an attempt to break an older monopoly of knowledge, one based upon writing and inhabiting an elitist educational system.

In certain respects, the so-called community media experiments have built upon these experiments in the field of education (which on a small scale is confirmed in the case of TEVEC and the first CTV in Normandin). The same notions of access and of the cooperative control of the communications process, the same critique of the dominant model of uni-directional communications (traditional teaching and the mass media) and experimentation with alternatives are to be found there. This current of ideas is to be linked with the ideology of cooperation, whose deep roots among the people of Quebec has been remarked upon by various sociologists.

In an era when the community has practically disappeared and given away to a society of conflict, the choice of the term "community" to characterize these experiments has the odor of nostalgia. It manifests an aspiration towards consensus which, surprisingly, is being rediscovered in communication experiments. Ideal communication is often defined as a search for an understanding of shared communion such that ambiguities, incomprehension and conflict are perceived as failures, anomalies and disfunctioning.

Federal-Provincial political relations constitute another site where important stakes are at issue concerning communications, the social relevance of which no doubt has an influence on the theoretical work of Quebec researchers. The omnipresence of Federal-Provincial conflicts in anything touching upon communications underlines and accentuates the importance of politics, power, conflict and negotiation in the representation of communication processes. This political dimension stands out more here than elsewhere, and occasionally overshadows other dimensions, such as the economic.

The Quebecois often take refuge behind their government for the defense of their language, their culture and their acquired rights. State intervention in the fields of culture and communications seems to be a fact accepted by a majority of the population. The concept of political control thus comes easily to the minds of communications researchers. That of negotiation as well. Little has been done, in communications, in the way of a rational explanation of that legendary attitude to the Quebecois which consists of not putting all their eggs in one basket, and which foreign political analysts so often find disconcerting. Let us not forget as well that the Quebecois break all records as far as strikes are concerned. And, above all, one should take into account the fact that the Quebecois are a people with a sense of humour, who love a good time. To have such a fondness for wordplay and situation comedy means deriving pleasure from ambiguity, polysemy and zaniness. Unless, placed in a dramatic historical situation, the Quebecois have had no other choice than that between laughing and crying.

Finally, the minority position of Francophones in America and

the American cultural invasion make Quebec researchers particularly attentive to everything relating to cultural identity and development. For more than three centuries, the Quebecois have clung to their language and culture. Contrary to all expectations, this cultural minority has not only managed to survive, but has developed and offered proof of its creativity. Throughout its history, however, it has had to defend itself and fight against repeated assaults aimed at its assimilation. This context of cultural struggle places the concept of culture at the centre of any communicational problematic in Quebec. As well as being a central concept, it is also an integrative concept, which gives coherence to the educational, social and political concerns previously discussed.

### **Communication and culture**

At the theoretical level, communication and culture are also mutually-dependent concepts. Communication is simultaneously a product of a culture, and a part and condition of culture<sup>10</sup>. Communications systems are products of culture in the sense that they are created by specific social groups and are marked by their ways of perceiving, feeling and thinking. However, they are only a part of this culture, which may be defined in general terms as a life-environment, including the tools, institutions, beliefs, customs and language shared by the members of a specific social group. At a fundamental level, however, communication systems are a condition of culture in the sense that they are the necessary mediators in the sharing of beliefs, values, norms and knowledge within a given society. Without communication, no culture is possible.

In our western societies, as I have already stressed, a major part of communicational relations are technically mediated. Innis has clearly shown how each society privileges a form of communications, around which a monopoly of knowledge takes shape, and on the basis of which is structured a particular worldview and political organization emphasizing either temporality or spatiality, centralization or regionalization.

Technological development does not take place only in function of an internal logic, independent of any social, cultural and economic determination. The technical object belongs to a culture triply, by virtue of its genesis, its use and its signification. I referred previously to a major characteristic of contemporary scientific and technical knowledge: its overvalorization of mathematization and quantification. I also stressed the link which, according to Schiller, joins such a conception to the characteristics of social merchandization in an economy of a capitalist type.

It seems to me that another axis should be added to Innis' spatio-temporal analysis, one going from concretude to abstraction. In his



classical analysis of Chinese thought, Marcel Granet clearly demonstrates the concrete character of notions of space and time in traditional China: "The Chinese are in no way concerned with conceiving time and space as two homogeneous domains, capable of containing abstract concepts. They have broken them down conjointly into five great columns, which they use to distribute the emblems signifying the diversity of occasions and sites."<sup>11</sup> Georges Friedmann, in his already classic but still pertinent reflections on natural and technical environments, has made very clear the proximity of man and his environment in traditional societies: "In all aspects, in comparison with our own, one has that feeling that in the natural world, man more fully presides at all of his activities, is more profoundly linked to things and to men — work in the town and country, crafts and liberal arts, war — and that nothing allows him to disappear from the event, to find for himself a substitute. He pays with his person, he is always in full form"<sup>13</sup>.

Beginning with the Renaissance, we have witnessed in the West, under the double impulse of the development of scientific thought and of capitalism, the promotion and valorization of the quantitative of the spirit of abstraction and merchandization. The history of the west since the Renaissance may be reconstructed as a thread leading towards an increasing abstraction of the relationships of man to nature and of man to society and culture.

Following the rationalization and merchandization of work relations, travel and housework, the capitalist economy, through an ever-increasing industrialization of culture and communications, is now going after the abstraction of symbolic relations. As with the production of material objects, one can now see, within the cultural industries, the same tendencies towards the standardization of production processes, the uniformity of contents, and the individualization of consumption.

Cultural diversity is an obstruction to the magnates of international capitalism. National languages and regional particularities constitute obstacles to the extension of markets. If, since the 15th century, the printing press has favoured the promotion of vernacular languages and the constitution of nations, the culture industries of the present work towards their destruction. The Quebecois are well placed to feel this pressure towards uniformity, from the English language and the American way of life.

The contemporary media, as Innis saw so clearly with respect to the large daily newspapers, privilege space at the expense of temporal duration. However, this is a homogenized space, abstracted from its local characteristics. Despite the ideological discourse on bi-directionality, feedback, etc., the modern media, including the very newest (satellites, videotex, telematics, etc.) favour centralization over regionalization, homogeneity over diversity.

The abstraction of social and symbolic relations produces the one dimensional man, the one dimensional culture and the one dimensional society. As Lévi-Strauss has so aptly written, "our relations with others are no longer, except in an occasional and fragmentary way, based on that global experience, that concrete apprehension of a subject by another".<sup>10</sup>

### Towards a critical communications theory

As Susan Crean and Marcel Rioux have written, "it perhaps falls upon small nations like ours, who have fewer acquired interests than others to defend, to be so audacious as to imagine a different way of life, a different society."<sup>6</sup> This wish is not without its echoes of Innis' idea that it is on the peripheries of empires — with their monopoly of knowledge articulated upon the domination of a medium — that alternative systems may develop.

The promotion of cultural diversity in no way implies a rejection of the fruits of universalism, nor of intercultural exchanges. Communications theory in Quebec and Canada must remain very open to outside contributions. It should nevertheless avoid a servitude to dominant models, and cannot do so without developing within a critical perspective.

### FOOTNOTES

1. Smythe, Dallas, "La science est oecuménique ou devrait l'être," photocopied, Université Laval, 1980, pp. 4-5.
2. Leiss, William, *The Domination of Nature*, George Braziller, New York, 1972, pp. 131-132.
3. Cited in William Leiss, *op. cit.*, p. 113.
4. Government of Quebec, *La politique québécoise du développement culturel* éditeur officiel du Québec, 1978, p.9.
5. Añali, Jacques, *La nouvelle économie française*.
6. Crean, Suzanne and Marcel Rioux. *Deux pays à vivre: un plaidoyer*, Ed. Albert St-Martin, 1980.
7. See Mattelart, A. and J.M. Piemme, *Télévision: enjeux sans frontières*, Presses universitaires de Grenoble, 1980.
8. See Tremblay, Gaétan, "Aspects socio-culturels de la télévision à péage," paper presented to the A.R.C.Q. colloquium, May, 1981, forthcoming from Editions Albert St-Martin.
9. See *Le Devoir*, 14-03-79.
10. See Lévi-Strauss, Claude, *Anthropologie structurale*, Plon, 1958.
11. Granet, Marcel, *la Pensée Chinoise*, Paris, Ed. Albin Michel, 1934.
12. Government of Canada, *C.R.T.C. Faits sommaires sur la radio-diffusion et les télécommunications au Canada*, December, 1980.
13. Friedmann, *Où va le travail humain?*, Gallimard, 1963.